

**Interview with Mary Agee of Northern Virginia Family Service
conducted by Linda Byrne for the Providence District History Project
Providence Perspective**

Linda: I am Linda Byrne today is May 14, 2008 and I am at Supervisor Linda Smyth's office with Mary Agee and the purpose of this is for the History Project known as Providence Prospective. Good afternoon Mary.

Mary: Good afternoon Mary.

Linda: Thank you for being here. Mary this interview is going to be very interesting because both your personal history and also what you do as Director and Chair of the Board of The Northern Virginia Family Services; but let's start back at the beginning. Where were you born and where did you grow up?

Mary: I was born actually in St. Paul, Minnesota and, but, I was two years old when we moved to California, so I grew up in the area that is now called Silicone Valley right outside of San Jose. And about a week after I graduated from high school my folks went back to Minnesota; and I went to the University of California and graduated from Berkeley with my Master's in Social Work.

Linda: From there did you come east?

Mary: Actually, yes the day my husband and I walked out of our last graduate class. In those days, the early 70's, in Berkeley you didn't go to graduation everybody was too busy protesting. So, he had gotten a job out here in Washington, DC and so we got into our Toyota and drove across the country and thought we'd go back to California in about five years. This was just going to be an experiment to head east.

Linda: What type of work does he do?

Mary: He is an Engineer by training and he is in business development with a company that builds airports and expands and renovates airports. So, he travels all over the country trying to win those jobs. And I came here and started interviewing and found this job as a brand new graduate in 1972 as a family counselor at an organization called Northern Virginia Family Service, and that was my beginning of a career.

Linda: Were you living in Fairfax County when you first moved here?

Mary: When we first moved we rented, in North Arlington, the basement of an old house which of course is no longer there. And we saved up our money and we bought our first house in Northwest D.C. It was a little rambler right near Takoma Park, Maryland and it was a wonderful diverse community.

We loved it until we had our first child and I suddenly looked around me and went down to the local neighborhood school in D.C., that lasted about one hour and in less than two months we had sold the house and bought a house in Fairfax. It was very clear to me that the public school system in D.C. was not going to be the right one for our children. I went around to all our diverse neighbors and everyone there sent their children to private schools and we were both strong believers in the public school system.

And so, my brother lived in Mantua in Fairfax and we went out there one day to see them and there happened to be a house for sale not too far from them and we ran over and saw it and bought it. It was a very quick transition so it was sort of fate that brought us out here to Fairfax.

Linda: That's wonderful - so you have been in Mantua since the 70's?

Mary: Since 1978.

Linda: Tell me about the school system in Fairfax, did it turn out what you expected and hoped for?

Mary: It was wonderful. Our children went to Mantua Elementary and then Frost and then Woodson and I am not sure there is a better pyramid in Fairfax County, probably Northern Virginia. It was really a great experience for them. Our children did well in school, they got the support they needed and the schools were all very close to where we lived so it was just a wonderful experience. And of course I jumped in and was PTA president at Mantua and PTA president at Frost and served a couple of years on the PTA Board at Woodson and then decided probably somebody else could do this so it has been good for our family.

Linda: Were you working all that time at Northern Virginia Family Services?

Mary: Yes all that time except two years in the 70's I left to work for a very fascinating Federal Government job where I went to the Department of Army where I went to Ft. Myers Army Community Services. They needed someone to establish a family-counseling center and so I had this wonderful job that nobody would have ever imagined looked like a Federal Government job because I had no real accountability as long as I kept the Commander and his wife happy.

I could design programs and it was eye opening for me to serve military families because you had to remember where I came from, from Berkeley in the late 60's early 70's so I philosophically hated everything about military during the Viet Nam war of course and this humanized the military for me and I saw the huge impact more negative impact on families, on the spouses and the children.

In those days they were moving every two years so it was quite an honor to do that and then the Deputy Director position at Northern Virginia Family Service opened up and the Director called me and said would you be interested in coming back? And I had always wanted that position because that was a position that could create programs and I just felt that the direct service wasn't perhaps my greatest niche and that this might be really something for me to try so I went back and stayed until he retired in 1988 and then the Board then appointed me the Executive Director.

Linda: Tell me about the organization.

Mary: Well let's see we would need a long time Linda to tell you all about Northern Virginia Family Service. But in a nutshell - I really describe it as the mission is to support children and families and to support the communities in which they live and work. And we do that through a number of sites and programs, staff and volunteers. We have programs that span from homeless prevention to health access for children and adults, mental health, foster care, our healthy families program for the first time, vulnerable parents, early head start, head start, we have child development centers, job training programs - just a multitude of programs that are really there to give families the tools so that they can be successful in their family life and in their community life and I have had a remarkable career. It has been quite amazing and quite an honor. So that we are going to be heading into next years budget starting July 1st with about a \$23,000,000 budget, about 350 employees, well over 1000 volunteers that span about eight or nine offices throughout the region so it's been exciting to see the change and adaptation over the years based on the needs of the community. It certainly doesn't look anything like it was not only when I came in the 70's or even when I first started as Executive director in 1988. It is a whole completely different organization and it should be.

Linda: So is that in terms of the population that you are serving as well as the monies and programs?

Mary: Yes, a lot of it is for example last year out of about 23,000 people we served over half of those individuals English was not their first language. And that means that your staff have to reflect that and so that's one very obvious change is who we are serving and diversity of the languages one needs.

The diversity of locations, this is a huge area to cover and not everybody has cars so you really have to be dispersed. And then programs new programs have evolved.

The last 20 years there has been a lot of brain research and understanding and discovery of how important it is to work with children as soon as they are born and until they start school. That 0 to 5 and especially the 0 to 3 is probably the most critical time in the life of a human being to intervene towards their long-term success. The highest percentage of abuse in children occurs under the age of three; under the age of two the highest reason for fatality in this country is abuse. I just learned this morning from a neuroscientist that they are finding a causal relationship between children who have been severely abused and suicide. So it is so critical that that's the key and because of that research we really looked for programs that we didn't have 20 years ago that would help get us working with families that haven't any particular needs that are vulnerable in certain areas that we could be in there helping them, making sure that they have the resources needed, making sure they understood the positive parenting skills they needed how to help the child's brain development in the most beneficial way.

And so programs started growing, like our healthy families or the early head start. The Federal government that headed head started realized about 10 or 12 years ago that starting at age three was too late, and so we now have the second largest early head start site in the county. The only larger one is in Los Angeles. So that changed the face a lot.

The increased housing, in the last 10 or 15 years more and more of our resources are going to trying to keep the people in their homes so they are not evicted. Developing loan programs to help families, that need just doesn't go away it just keeps growing and has over time. There are many, many ways I could go on about how we have had to respond or we have chosen to respond to growing needs and trying new ways to tackle that.

Linda: I was noticing that the year this organization was founded was 1924.

Mary: Yes I love our history in that every new staff member who comes I

do an orientation and I go into history, and I can talk all day about our history.

We started in 1924 in Alexandria when a group of volunteers and this is pre-welfare days recognized that there were children going to school in the winter with no coats, that children who were sick had no medicine that families did not have enough coal to heat their homes. And so a group of volunteers mainly from the area churches came together to help pull together those resources and then distribute them. And that's how most non profits in this country start it's a group of volunteers who see a particular community need; they get together and they develop a strategy to address it and then what happens generally is if successful it out grows the capacity of the volunteers to manage it which is what happened here. So then they hire a part time caseworker and then it grew from there.

In one of our moves many years ago in Alexandria we discovered, in an attic all of the Board Minutes from the 20's and early 30's on the onion skin paper and hand scripted. They didn't have confidentiality laws in those days so it has all the names and addresses and then the total number of tons of coal that year that had been delivered, the total number of bottles medicine and how many coats and pairs of shoes it was just precious information to have.

And then in the 50's when the population started pushing further out into the suburbs and you began in the 50's that professionalization of social work and more of a recognition; well a group of families in Falls Church saw a need for professional counseling for families that was affordable so they banded together, raised some money and hired a part time social worker to provide family counseling. This went on for a while and the United Way was funding both of these family serving organizations and in those days when United Way funded you, they funded 90% of your total organizational cost. It is not like now where it is a year-to-year program specific.

So there is interesting correspondence, they sent a letter in the early 60's to both organizations and said they were no longer going to fund both and

that they needed to merge or they were going to choose which one they were going to de-fund.

Well for several months, it is fascinating to read the two sets of Board Minutes because the ones in Alexandria said well our services are more important because we are keeping food on the table and keeping the houses warm and children healthy. And the Board in Falls Church says that's all well and good but if a family is dysfunctional and their child runs away or the father leaves the family so they don't have their family anymore. Well money finally won out and they agreed to merge and formed Northern Virginia Family Service.

The reason I usually tell our staff the history is because I think it set the groundwork for who we've become. That for any family it shouldn't and it is not and either or and both impact at the same level a family's ability to succeed. Certainly if they don't have food it is critical, if they are really unhappy in relationships or worried to death about their child whose failing school that's equally pressing on their emotional being so I think that it speaks to our philosophy of how we have evolved.

Linda: It has gotten to be such a large organization from its birth, so to speak, and as you were talking, the information I have here your budget was even lower back in 2006. What are some of the changes you have seen in the types of people that you are serving over the years?

Mary: Type of changes?

Linda: Yes

Mary: Well I think certainly the ethnic diversity is probably the key change, we also or other thing we've noticed in the last 15 years especially I would say would be the severity of issues. It is a rare family that walks in that has just one issue. They're so complex – it's so hard to survive in this region. I don't know how most of our families that we work with do it - what is our statistic 60% or 70% of the families we served last year their total family income is under \$20,000 so I don't know how they do it and my hat goes off

to them. But with the increasing costs the pressure is so severe and there is no room for a mistake, there's no room for somebody to get sick and so if one of the parents might get ill it can totally destroy a family's economic stability. So it just seems like the intensity of the issues are there.

The interesting thing is the needs frankly I feel have not changed at all since I came in the 70's. If I look at housing was a huge issue when I came. It's just too big of an issue – it's just very hard to get that – having affordable housing is a huge ticket. It's a hard thing to resolve quickly. The lack of accessible affordable health care, it was there in the 70's and it is still there even with all the programs in the world there is a large group of working families that are not quite poor enough to be eligible for State and Federal programs. But there is no way they can afford the premiums and the deductibles, so it's a huge dilemma.

Child care I don't know how families afford child care I honestly don't know it and I know that we have huge waiting lists where we provide services for infants and toddlers for low income families in Arlington and Manassas and it is just enormous hundred's of families. That part concerns me in terms of how we are handling the welfare of our children and while there's been increased subsidies it hasn't kept pace with the population influx.

I was talking with Verdi Hayworth the other day and he was talking saying he was complaining about a meeting in Richmond that the formulas don't favor Fairfax because our percentage of poverty those under the poverty level is so small.

Linda: And Verdi Hayworth is?

Mary: The Deputy County Executive and oversees all of the services in Fairfax County and he had an incredible statistic that said the problem is that maybe only 2% of our population but when you have over a million people the sheer numbers of the poor exceeds Richmond and Norfolk combined. But we get so much less and it's because it is based on percentage. I had never heard that stat before and I'm like you are right 2%

on over a million is a big number based on whatever it might be. A hundred thousand or eighty thousand it's a huge number so those three very tangible hardcore needs have remained constant. The fourth one I have always talked about is the access to mental health and I know that this last year in the General Assembly certainly there was more money appropriated there has been a lot of attention since the Virginia Tech tragedy, but it's a drop in the bucket. So those needs haven't varied, the faces who access them have changed but the needs themselves have remain pretty constant. When I first came in the 70's it was predominately African Americans and Caucasians and then in the middle 70's and into the 80's we added a lot of South East Asian nationalities coming from following the Viet Nam War and the Korean community. The 80's started a lot of other refugees groups coming from Eastern Europeans, Africans and of course Central and South America a huge influx started. So the faces just keep changing. So does that answer the question?

Linda: yes.

Linda: Other volunteer organizations that are within Fairfax County, and there are many that talk about how you integrate how you communicate, is there any working together?

Mary: There is a lot of collaboration I don't have a lot of patience for people that somehow make the assumption that there's a million groups and nobody's talking to anybody. We could say the same thing about business. There're millions of businesses but nobody is talking to each other, but in fact we are. There are several mechanisms and what happens is that there are many non-profits all with particular focuses so that those that are really focused on delivery of health care work very closely together and with Fairfax County's Health Department and their clinics. Those of us in early childhood do the same. Housing, the challenge for Northern Virginia Family Service is that we need to be in all those circles and that becomes a real challenge for us just manpower wise. But there's also mechanisms if people choose, there's been a long standing that I hope to create and I do not know it must be 18 or 19 years ago a Human Service

Coalition of Northern Virginia that brought 70 or 80 non-profits together it wasn't just Fairfax although probably 80 percent of the members were Fairfax. And now we just formed a new group that is called non-profit NOVA which isn't just for human service but is trying to bring – it'll affiliate with the round table the non-profit round table out of greater Washington to really look at the impact non-profits are making in the region and the value added, that's a little bit of digression. But we work very closely, there are certain, non-profits are no different than other businesses so you find your colleagues that you trust and respect and you form informal alliances with them and look at working together on projects and that's what we've done. There is very little that northern Virginia Family Services does just by itself, almost everything we do is involving government, Fairfax County, and a number of non-profits and it might involve some foundations, businesses coming to support with volunteers or in-kind support. It's a lot of what we do and it's a lot of where my time goes in nurturing those collaborations. So a lot of activity goes on.

Linda: I noticed Volunteer Fairfax - what do they have registered some 700 non-profits in Fairfax County? We have such a large number here. Do you find you have the necessary volunteers? Are people willing to step up and volunteer where needed?

Mary: We have a lot, we have over 1,000 volunteers a year that provide over 20,000 hours of service and it is never enough. We just expanded our volunteer coordinator capacity because we want to expand some use of volunteers in some of our key programs because we recognize the benefit of that to the clients and to the organization. Probably besides our Thrift Stores that wouldn't be open without volunteers basically one of our job training programs is called Training Futures at Tyson's in one of the Booze Allen buildings. Every day we have a minimum of five to six volunteers in to support the staff and to support the trainees. They come in and help do one on one mentoring or they are at the computer lab or volunteers might come in and help work one on one on writing on resumes and practice interviewing when they get close to starting to look for jobs. Booze Allen likes to send in a group that does a panel on business ethics. Another, I think, is Deloitte who sends in a team as a Dress for Success kind of presentation. So it's really limitless and the limitation really on an

organization like ours or anyone if you are responsibly engaging volunteers is to have the paid staff time and capacity to organize that so that volunteers get appropriately matched, trained and supported. So we have a ways to go on that but boy I don't know that any non-profit could really be all that successful without volunteers.

Linda: Over the years how has Fairfax County been receptive, the Government have they been helpful? And how?

Mary: Yes, hopefully nobody outside of Fairfax will hear this because I have the fun job of working with all the jurisdictions. Fairfax is my favorite and part of that is just because it is the largest by far but it is the most collaborative with non-profits it is more committed than any other jurisdiction to having a strong human service, health and human service infrastructure that's not just county driven. Not many of the others do that in the way that Fairfax does it.

Linda: Can you name the others please? I should have asked you that early on about the Northern Virginia Family Service.

Mary: Sure, it is Arlington County, the City of Alexandria, the City of Falls Church, Prince William County, City of Manassas, Loudon County and all those jurisdictions have little townships and anything contained within those boundaries we certainly are there to serve.

Linda: What kinds of things would you say that someone moving to Fairfax County should look for if they are a low-income family coming in here? How would they find you or how would you find them?

Mary: That is a good question because it could be in so many different ways. So many of the calls we get are referred through their central intake number in Fairfax County or through one of the departments. So if somebody received an eviction notice and lives in Fairfax the first instinct might be to call the Housing Department or something and they are going to say call Northern Virginia Family Service. They might call up or show up at the Health Department for services for a sick child that they are not

equipped to handle and they are going to say call Northern Virginia Family Service for that children's program. A lot of it is also through the county or the courts like Foster care has to come through the court system and then through the county. A lot of word of mouth, a lot of our services people will call up and say so and so down the street got this help from you and I have the same problem. So I am always amazed at the number of people who call still either from hard Yellow Pages or Electronic Yellow Pages, and we are I guess from our name a place to start so it can come in so many different ways depending on the program.

Linda: Is there anything we haven't covered that you think would be important for the purposes of this interview and the book?

Mary: Well you know for Providence I live in Providence but one of my first community assignments was in Providence District as a social worker in the 70's. I was asked, I hadn't been here more than a year or two and United Way in the early 70's when there was a horrible recession, they lost over half of their funding that year. And again in those days if you were one of the big 100 which Northern Virginia Family Services was you got a significant amount of your total budget and I can remember the Executive Director announcing that we had lost over half of our funding. Now this was a pretty teeny organization then, it had about 14 staff so I went home to prepare my resume because I was the last hired so I figured I am out of there. And about a week later the Executive Director called me into his office and said that I was staying. And the reason he was keeping me was one of the other complaints from United Way had been that Northern Virginia Family Service was operating as a mini private therapy office and we needed to take our services out in the community and nobody knew how to do that and could I figure it out. Well, I was one year out of graduate school I didn't have a clue but I said sure. I thought that was an exciting challenge and so he freed me up of half time of my caseload and said go forth and figure this out. And one of the very first people that I went to see was Jim Scott and I can't remember if he was a supervisor then or if he was just in the office doing something in the office but we started chatting. And you know I just naively said you know what are the needs and where should I start; and he pointed, and at that time the office was at Loehman's and he just pointed

and he said right across the street is where you need to start. And we did, I just started going door-to-door and meeting with families in their homes and finding out what was on their minds and the rest is sort of history from there. So Providence District and the supervisors have always held a warm spot in my heart. Jim helped get one of our very first Fairfax County Grants to help support the work that was in Jefferson Village at the time, so it was called. There's not enough thanks in the world for that because it hopefully helped a lot of families but it helped us see the way we needed to be delivering services was to be out of the office just meeting people where they are naturally living and working and playing. I just wanted to add that because it was sort of a wonderful beginning for us.

Linda: I noticed you had a Gala so it is not all work, you do take time to appreciate those that are helping you and what you are doing and it is an opportunity for the community to appreciate what you all do.

Mary: Right, we had a great party over 500 people joined us at the Hilton McLean and (Supervisor) Linda Smyth and her husband Nigel were there the whole evening; which was great to have them and we raised a lot of money, the most ever. And as some people said, sitting in the room, it's really hard to believe there is a recession going on in this room because of the number of people and we had 20 new sponsors and very lively bidding on the auction. I am always amazed at the generosity of people of Fairfax; there is just something about it and the businesses in Fairfax. I was just speaking over at GNET to a group of businesses leaders and just said that I don't know a community anywhere that has the generosity the spirit that Northern Virginia has. If any of my colleges start badmouthing businesses corporate support I tell them, not on my watch. Anywhere that we can talk people respond either with money, volunteering their time, or maybe they have and in kind gift or maybe they have a skill or maybe like oh gosh like Microsoft. We wouldn't have a job training program at Tyson's if it weren't for Microsoft to supply all the software and all the upgrades all the time for 50 plus computers, we couldn't afford that. So everybody pitches in – it's really quite remarkable.

Linda: What do you see for the future?

Mary: Oh man the future - a lot of hope, there's a lot of good discussions going on in Fairfax about ending homeless, having health care for all. Sometimes I get discouraged when I say things like I did earlier the needs haven't changed and they probably won't but hopefully the capacity in Fairfax to respond will grow so that the need is much smaller and that it is addressed more quickly.

Fairfax just has so much going for it and I think that in the government and the non-profits and the business community working together, I just think we can do better and I am pretty confident we will do better when it comes to the health and human services arena.

I hope that Northern Virginia Family Service continues to be the flexible, adaptable organization; that its size doesn't get in its way. I'll try my hardest to make sure that doesn't happen so that we can be responsive and can help make sure that children and families get off to really strong starts.

Linda: Well thank you this has been a most informative interview.